



Key Mental and Behavioral Health Issues Related to Social Distancing For State, Local, And Tribal Health Departments And Community Based Organizations

Fact Sheet

May 5, 2009 3:00 PM ET

This document provides interim guidance and will be updated as needed.

Rationale

Feedback from the public suggests that most people understand the need for, and are willing to accept community mitigation interventions as a strategy for dealing with a pandemic. However, it is likely that use of these strategies may raise concerns and feelings of uncertainty. In some people these feelings may lead to increased tension, fear, anger, depression, and possibly grief. In some cases, these feelings can lead to aggressive and abusive behavior among household members or in community settings. The behavior may take the form of verbal, physical or emotional abuse. It is important to prepare for the key issues discussed below.

Limited Availability of Supplies for Basic Needs

Many individuals will not have obtained recommended supplies of food, water, medicines or other basic necessities for various reasons (Pandemic Flu Planning Checklist for Individuals and Families: <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/checklist.html> (<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/checklist.html>) (#linkPolicy)). Unless provisions are made to make supplies available to these individuals it will be difficult for them to follow social distancing recommendations. It will be particularly important to ensure that the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged or other vulnerable populations are addressed.

Recommendations

- Develop plans to get supplies to the homes of those in need. Coordinate with trusted faith-based, non-governmental, and community organizations to assess needs and deliver supplies door-to-door.
- Coordinate with local businesses and organizations to obtain additional supplies for those without means to purchase food/water/medicines and other basic needs.

Disruption Of Traditional Counseling Services

Community mitigation strategies will disrupt traditional counseling services. Innovative uses of technology (such as the Internet or telecommunications) to help reduce stress will help provide alternatives to, or supplement current office-based mental health practices and address increased demand created by the stresses of social distancing. Technology should help address the following areas:

- Continuation of therapy and medication services for those with chronic mental illness, including those in treatment for chemical dependence;
- Emotional support and problem-solving skills to assist families with increased stress created by social distancing (e.g., parents with young children at home, families with a sick family member, families who have experienced the death of loved ones);
- Prevention of new mental health problems; and
- Prevention of inappropriate behavior and family relations that could lead to intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, and elder abuse in response to stress.

Recommendations

- Identify innovative uses of technology to help reduce stress.
- Develop and disseminate mental health interventions that can be delivered by telephone or internet.
- Train mental health providers in alternate delivery mechanisms for traditional services as

well as brief stress-focused counseling.

Disruption Of Traditional Methods To Cope With Loss And Grief

Traditional rituals that help individuals cope with death and begin the process of coping with grief and loss (funerals, viewings) may need to be postponed or canceled. This will create significant mental health problems in the population at large, and may undermine adherence to health recommendations.

Recommendations

- Identify innovative uses of technology for activities, such as viewings, memorial services, and grief support groups.
- Work with the faith-based, non-governmental and community organizations to provide support (e.g. pastoral care) by phone or other alternatives.

Obtaining Up-To-Date Information During Times When Social Distancing Is Recommended

Recommendations for social distancing may make it difficult for some to receive up-to-date information on the current situation, which may lead to additional stress, as well as reluctance to follow recommended mitigation strategies.

Recommendations

- Distribute information through reliable information sources including selected television and radio stations, internet sites – especially [cdc.gov/h1n1flu/](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/) (<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>) - and phone numbers that people can call for accurate information.
- Consider ways of disseminating this information door-to-door or in mailboxes, perhaps by working with faith-based, non-governmental and community organizations.



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